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ABSTRACT

A study examined how technology is being used in "youth at risk" programs through a survey sent to programs in the technical and further education and adult and community sector in New South Wales. About 214 surveys were sent with a response rate of 18 percent. Findings and issues arising from a literature review and the survey may be summarized under these headings: definitions of youth at risk; voice of youth; reasons for early school leaving; effects of early school leaving; fragmentation of services; access to technology; and need for professional development. The literature review, survey data, and participants at youth conferences were in agreement about what makes for effective youth programs, which includes: early intervention; collaborative partnerships; coordination between services and agencies; individual and long-term case management; small teacher/student ratios; empathetic staff, including those on the front desk; a broader, more practical and flexible curriculum; positive, youth-friendly or adult learning environments; placing youth workers in schools and teachers in youth centers; adequate food, shelter, and clothing; removing artificial or legislative barriers that impede appropriate service delivery; a central agency to provide information and support for youth and families; funding systems that respond to local needs as part of a holistic approach; and a national commitment to youth. (Appendixes include 28 references; observations; and survey and results.) (YLB)

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Adult Literacy and Numeracy
Australian Research Consortium (ALNARC)

'Youth at risk': Is technology an answer?

Jenny McGuirk

Project report 2 2000-2001

NSW ALNARC
Centre for Language and Literacy
University of Technology, Sydney

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THE REPORT

Background

In the latter half of 2000, NSW ALNARC carried out a small research project into 'youth at risk' and technology. There is general acceptance within the community about the attraction of computers for youth; the government is pouring resources into making sure that schools have computers; the world is becoming ever more reliant on technological literacy. But where does that leave 'youth at risk'? Are the programs they're accessing equipping them for a technological world? Are computers the 'way in' to further education and training or employment for these groups? Are computers increasing their access to, and participation in, a global, information-rich community? These were some of the questions that formed the basis of the project.

The project

The project began with a survey that was sent to 'youth at risk' programs in TAFE (Adult Basic Education and Outreach sections), and the Adult and Community sector (ACE), many of whom received Helping Early Leavers Program (HELP) funding, a state government initiative. Approximately 214 surveys were sent with a response rate of 18%. The survey results will be discussed more fully later in the paper.

As well, two observations were made: one of a TAFE computer elective, part of the Certificate in Adult Foundation Education in an outer western suburb of Sydney; the other of a class at OASIS, the Salvation Army's Youth Support Network in an inner city suburb, where the young people were doing the equivalent of Year 10 by distance from OTEN (Open Training and Education Network, the distance arm of TAFE NSW).

Interviews were also held with two teachers working with youth, and a literature review of 'youth' and 'technology' was conducted.

Findings and issues arising from the literature review and the survey can be summarised under a number of headings: definitions of 'youth at risk', 'voice', reasons for early school leaving, effects of early school leaving, fragmentation of services, access to technology, the need for professional development and finally, recommendations for a coordinated youth policy. Each of these issues will be discussed in turn.

Definitions of 'youth at risk'

It is important to be clear about what is meant by 'youth at risk' as it soon became apparent that a number of definitions operate concurrently. Defining people in certain ways often determines society's attitudes and responses to them. It certainly determines government policy. One of the more general definitions is:

> at risk' of not being able to participate in society in ways that are meaningful and purposeful for themselves or society in general. (Ovens 2000:1)

Such a broad definition encompasses a growing number of young people in our current society. More specifically, the Helping Early Leavers Program (HELP) in NSW identifies two groups of 'at risk' youth:

- unemployed early school leavers who lack the basic education and social skills necessary to access and remain in training and education pathways or obtain and remain in employment
- government high school students at risk of being alienated from the education system before completing two years post-compulsory education or other training ... (1999/2000 HELP Guidelines)

Ages of 'at risk' youth are classified from 15 to 19 in some instances, to 16 to 21 in others. Labour force data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) shows that young people in the 20-24 age bracket who are not employed full time or in education, are likely to be early school leavers from rural locations, who attended a government school and whose parents come from unskilled manual occupations (Queensland Chamber of Commerce and Industry [QCCI] 2000:4).

Many adults also perceive youth as being at risk of homelessness, drug abuse, violence, crime, prostitution and suicide. When homeless kids are asked themselves what they perceive of as risks, they answer the following:

- mixing with gronks [ie boring, old people]
- school
- not paying dealers
- family relationships
- no friends

- drugs
- squats - sleeping [ie going to sleep in a squat and therefore being vulnerable] (Poynter 2000)

The way we define things often predetermines what sorts of interventions can, and are, made. Defining youth as a 'problem' creates a youth industry to solve the problem.

> The political process of defining 'youth' in their various forms is an enterprise that legitimates the normalising interventions of the state, often facilitated through the activities of experts. (Bessant 1998:26)

Australia has a significant number of experts in the area of youth policy and services as evidenced in the literature review, including youth themselves. However, it appears that the 'problem' of youth at risk and what to do about them is not diminishing.

Voice

There is constant reference in the literature to the importance of consulting young people about what is happening to them, and what should be happening. It is important that the 'voice' of youth is heard when determining policy and practices that directly impinge on them. Who speaks then for young people and how do their voices get heard?

The example of the Australian Youth Policy and Action Coalition (AYPAC) is a pertinent one in terms of consulting young people about their situations and futures. AYPAC was the nation's peak lobby group representing a variety of youth organisations until the federal government replaced it with a Youth Roundtable, consisting of 50 members aged 15 to 24, who meet twice a year to advise the government on youth issues. AYPAC's executive officer, David Matthews suggested that this might be less than ideal:

> bringing 50 young people together twice a year was no replacement for a coalition representing 750,000 young people and with policy expertise. AYPAC had held annual policy forums, four national board meetings a year, and a biennial youth conference for 500 young people. It also had a Canberra-based secretariat of six, who analysed policy, responded to Government inquiries, and had input into legislation. (Youth Studies Australia 1998:5)

One of the most powerful individual voices that came out of the data was that of Rebecca, whose story was read out at the *Working Together— Reducing the Risk* conference, Sydney, 7 December 2000. Her story cries out for action:

> *My name is Rebecca I wanted to be with you today but my baby is sick and I couldn't make it ... anyway this is my story.*
>
> *I have no real family. They kicked me out when I was 15. My stepfather used to hit us for no reason and mum didn't believe us. I have two sisters and four brothers all younger than me and mum won't let me see them. I have to ring up my Grandmother to see if they are okay but my mum has stopped that too ... anyway 4 of them are out of home now and living in refuges too.*
>
> *I stayed in a squat so that DOCS couldn't find me and then I met Jason and we had a baby. We stayed at his parents house and that didn't work. They have 8 kids of their own. No ones got jobs. We all argued and we had to move out. Well ... Jason didn't ... they said I could leave the baby, and move out. No way ... I'm not leaving my baby. Anyway we all moved out into private accommodation. We had to wait 18 months for government assistance.*
>
> *We kept moving all the time, no money to pay rent, no money for bills and things, we were in squats, in refuges but we couldn't stay together in refuges because there's no places for couples especially if one of you is using. Jason uses a bit. So we went back to squats, anywhere we could find room.*
>
> *It's really hard having a baby to look after especially when you are homeless. I'm always looking for extra food or clothes, arguing with social security, and waiting. Waiting for priority housing, waiting for my money and trying to get work and trying to get day care if you can get work.*
>
> *We couldn't get services from the Government because we were together and they said that was defacto .... didn't matter that we were homeless.*
>
> *Jason tried to get some work but he kept getting angry with bosses and he kept getting very tired. When we ran out of food we rang the charity. They took two days each time to come out to interview us so we went to refuges to eat and they wouldn't let us in because it was too dangerous. The baby ate but sometimes we didn't.*
>
> *Then I got pregnant again. When the baby came Jason and me started arguing all the time and now he has moved out with my son. He's two now.*

They are at Jason's parents. I go to see them every day because my son doesn't understand why I'm not there to look after him. It takes me two hours to get there so we only have a short time together as my new baby can't be out in the cold air. We come home I watch TV and go to bed. I'm a bit lonely without Jason.

I know I have to get a job but its very hard if you don't have year 10. I have tried but nothing yet. I have tried a couple of courses but the kids get sick or need me and I cant go all the time so I cant catch up.

I need some help. I need to be able to read and write but I can't do it on my own. Maybe a service could have people to come to your house while the baby's asleep at night and teach me and leave some work for me to do in the day when I have some time.

Maybe there could be more places where couples can stay and learn how to get on with each other better. Maybe when I go to Social Security they could ask me how I am. Maybe someone could come and talk to me.

I am Rebecca and I am 17 and a half.

Rebecca's story demonstrates all too clearly the need for coordinated services across agencies and about the importance of human interactions and building relationships.

Another reported voice came from 63 homeless youth in Melbourne who were asked about their hopes and dreams for the future. Their responses were similar to any other group of young people:

> They want a house, a family, a job and money to pay the bills. (Horn 1998:19)

79% had an idea or plan for their ideal home. 95% expressed a preferred choice or job or career in the future. 81% wanted to get married or be in a permanent relationship and 59% wanted children. Such aspirations unfortunately contrasted starkly with their reality. While realising that money, training, education or getting a job were the means to achieving their dreams, 47% acknowledged a range of barriers, such as health issues, substance abuse, lack of motivation or determination, no self confidence and despondency. Only 41% said they were interested in further study or training. The study concluded that early intervention is crucial in identifying children at risk of non-completion of their education and bemoaned the fragmented approach to current initiatives (Horn 1998:16).

In relation to what youth at risk think about school and education, a survey of 1400 'at risk' young people, undertaken in 2000 for the Full Service Schools Program by the Australian Centre for Equity through Education and the Australian Youth Research Centre, revealed that they were disengaged from school, but not necessarily from education. While not homeless, these young people were at risk of leaving school early. They saw school as being not particularly relevant to their lives and was often a negative social environment. Of crucial importance in terms of how young people related to school was the relationship with teachers and adults. The kids stressed time and again how they wanted to be treated with respect but they did not feel they were valued in the school system. They saw the more academic kids being afforded more status and value than the non-academic ones. They were not listened to, or involved in decision making in the school. There was also no time to talk about things if they wanted to, for example the school counsellor or the careers advisor was often only available if you made an appointment for two weeks time. Many of the young people interviewed worked part time but had a very instrumental view of work as a means of simply getting money to survive. Work was seen as separate to education and not leading anywhere in particular. Along with these views was a passivity, an indifference or acceptance that this was the way things are. There was no sense that they could be change agents or active shapers of their future (Brown et al 2000).

In conclusion, it is obvious that being treated with respect, being listened to, having time to talk, having someone ask how you are when you go to Social Security, are all aspects of *building relationships* and seem crucial to the well-being of a society (and surely not so hard to do.)

Reasons for leaving school

A number of reports (Brown et al 2000, Horn 1998, Wiencke 1998) cite various reasons why young people leave school early. They include family breakdown, conflict with teachers, teachers' attitudes, lack of a future plan, lack of role modelling, drugs, not being able to keep up in class and not finding school stimulating or challenging. Each of the above-mentioned reports urges early intervention to identify those youth in danger of leaving school early and the implementation of strategies to support them in staying at school. Such strategies will be discussed later in the paper under the heading *Characteristics of effective youth programs*.

Given the reasons why young people leave school, what are the consequences or the effects?

The effects of early school leaving

The effects of early school leaving can be felt at a number of levels - on the individual, the family, the broader society and the economy.

At the individual level, the personal costs may include low self esteem, frustration and depression which are often associated with drug or alcohol dependency and its related milieu of violence, prostitution and crime. It has been found that early school leavers are three times more likely to be engaged in marginal activities and tend to occupy low-skilled, part-time jobs which are not linked to education or training. They are also more likely to remain unemployed five years after leaving school (QCCI 2000:3).

It appears that the most significant influence on the employment and earning capacity of young people is early success in school and completion of Year 12. However, Australia now lags behind many OECD countries (18 out of 26) in terms of completion of upper secondary schooling (QCCI 2000:3). The government predicts that the rate will rise in the future, from 57% in 1994 to 68% in 2005, but this of course remains to be seen (Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs [DETYA] 2000:3).

Meanwhile, the labour market is changing or has changed, and there are fewer full time job opportunities for teenagers and an increasing move to casual and contract labour. This situation is likely to continue where the long term trend is for more part-time work and greater participation by middle-aged women (DETYA 2000:3).

A study conducted under the auspices of the Dusseldorp Skills Forum estimated that each year some 35,000 students will not complete secondary schooling. Calculating direct monetary costs (including the effect of lost tax revenue and increased social security payments) and social or non-market costs (for example, calls on government health care, crime and social welfare services), the overall cost of one year's early school leavers to Australia is estimated to be $2.6 billion (QCCI 2000:4).

Obviously it is in everyone's best interests to reduce such effects - on the individual and the society. How is this to be done? Recent OECD data suggest that what is needed are youth-friendly labour markets, well-organised pathways, workplace experience combined with education, tightly-knit safety nets, good career information and advice and effective institutions and policy processes (Ovens 2000:1). Positive examples of where such things exist and are working well were found in the literature

— for example in a mentoring program at Cleveland St High School in inner Sydney and in programs run by the High St Youth Health Service in western Sydney. However, Australia has much work to do to achieve such objectives across the board.

Fragmentation of services

Youth services in Australia appear to be fragmented and uncoordinated. In a recent joint study by the Dusseldorp Skills Forum, Hanover Welfare Services, the Brotherhood of St Laurence and Melbourne City Mission, it was revealed that pathways through the school, ACE/TAFE and employment services sectors are fractured and disjointed with little coordination across systems and a lack of continuity of support or resourcing (Dearn 2000). Participants at the *Working Together — Reducing the Risk* conference concurred with these findings, reporting their own frustrations with fragmented approaches and lack of coordination between systems. Such experiences have also been reported by Ovens (2000B:15) and Horn (1998).

Accepting that something needs to be done about the situation as outlined above, and about engaging young people with education so as to prevent them leaving school early in order to avoid the individual, social and economic costs, and given the supposed attractiveness of technology for youth, does technology provide a way of keeping young people at school, of making school more stimulating, challenging or relevant?

Technology — an answer?

Many claims are made as to what technology can do; its potential and the possibilities it offers. Online learning can increase student participation, enthusiasm, interest; output and understanding of what producing written text involves (ALRN 1998:6). Computers are popular because they provide privacy, immediate feedback, individualisation, control and flexibility (ALRN 1998:12).

As well, it is claimed that students gain self confidence, work cooperatively in teams, take the initiative, are more self reliant, share decision-making and are imaginative and innovative (Carey 1997:29). They can become involved in real world research, can collaborate to change their environment and learn skills that are difficult to teach in the traditional classroom. However, it should be noted that these observations were made in an Information Technology (IT) secondary school classroom in Hobart by what seems to be an enthusiastic teacher who constructs positive learning environments. Whether or not less skilled or experienced teachers achieve the same

results is questionable. Carey stresses *that the educational value of computers does not lie in the computer per se nor the software used, but rather, it is the processes of teaching/learning employed that largely determines its value. .... it is the learning culture or environment.* (Carey 1997:31) He warns that the Internet can also be used for essentially trivial curriculum ends and can reinforce models of students as passive learners by continuing teaching styles that are basically 'cut, copy and paste'.

Such an attitude is reinforced by a US study referred to in a discussion paper by LifeLong Learning Associates that stressed that technology, *combined with good teaching practice*, can improve student learning (1999:10). The importance of teacher knowledge and skills can not be underestimated and has been a major reason for past failures in the uptake and integration of new technologies in schools (LifeLong Learning Associates 1997:10). This was also borne out in our survey which is discussed later in this paper.

Moving out of the classroom into cyberspace, claims are also made about the potential of IT to enhance the agency of young people, that is, to enhance their capacity to engage in positive, purposeful action to change and influence events (Bessant 1998:22). (This agency was missing in the Brown et al survey referred to earlier in the paper, where the young people who were at risk of leaving school early were passive and accepting of their fate.) One of the most powerful aspects of communicating via the Internet is the choice you can make about disclosing age, ethnicity and gender. In the USA for example, homeless people gain an *invaluable source of information and contacts without fear of being rejected because of their appearance* (Bessant 1998:24). It is unclear how the homeless people access the Net, perhaps through public libraries? Access to the global community is still fundamentally tied to economic privilege, despite claims about the democratising potential of the Internet:

> Information rich and information poor societies, and groups within those societies, still tend to be demarcated along north-south and east-west axes as well as divides of social class, gender and racialised differences. (Luke 1997:18)

In recent Australian Bureau of Statistics data, it was found that 47% of households had home Internet access and that it is the home that is the primary source of access (94%) for school, TAFE and university students, with educational institutions being the main secondary source (67%) (White 1999:4). Most of the people cited in this survey use the Internet primarily for email, research/education and entertainment/games, although

school and TAFE students use chat sessions more than research. Homeless youth are presumably not included in this data. Word processing software is the most common software used (White 1999:5). Such findings are consistent with what our survey found.

A further interesting observation about communicating in cyberspace is that young people are not 'moved on' as in real space. This gives them opportunities to gain confidence and experience and to have a say in the public sphere (Bessant 1998:25). However, Bessant also warns about the dangers the Net offers in terms of hard sell and exploitation (1998:28). E-businesses are increasingly targeting the youth market. A recent market research survey (Nielsen//NetRatings) revealed that the 18-24 year old age group accounts for 14% of Australian Net users (Sydney Morning Herald 12/12/2000:1).

In summary, we need to remember that access to cyberspace, like access to any space, involves issues of power, resources and competence. We need to be wary that we neither celebrate nor demonise technology and to be careful not to see it as having its own agency. It is a tool used by people in particular social contexts for particular purposes and its success will depend on how it is used (Snyder 1997).

The survey in brief

How technology is being used in 'youth at risk' programs was the subject of a survey administered during 2000, and the results of that survey support what was found in the literature.

As noted earlier, the project began with the survey (see Appendix 2) which was sent to 'youth at risk' programs in TAFE (Adult Basic Education and Outreach sections), and the Adult and Community sector (ACE), many of whom received Helping Early Leavers Program (HELP) funding, a state government initiative. Approximately 214 surveys were sent out with a response rate of 18%. The 38 respondents comprised 16 ABE teachers, 5 Outreach teachers, and 17HELP teachers. The data from the survey was analysed according to these categories, and though some differences showed up, generally the responses were similar across the groups. A more detailed account of the survey results can be found in Appendix 3.

Responses from the survey were largely positive about the use of computers with youth, saying that, when available, they lead to increased motivation, self esteem,

sharing of skills, confidence and learning. However a number of issues were raised such as resources, both physical and human, frustration when the technology did not work, varying access to the Internet, the need for small groups or one-to-one and the varying levels of teacher expertise with an accompanying need for professional development.

Typically most programs were using computers for word processing, with many also using internet, graphic and email facilities. They led it seemed to increased literacy and numeracy skills and worked to increase communication skills, through email and web use.

Resources are a key issue with varying levels of hardware and software across the state. Some programs are well resourced; others are using old computers, shared between students, with no Internet access. Resources also include staffing and it is apparent that small groups work best, and often 1:1 is required. This group of students is seen to be at the 'bottom of the line' for funding.

Teacher expertise also varies and impacts directly on student access to technology. The need for professional development is clear. As was obvious in the example cited previously of the Hobart IT classroom, the experience and enthusiasm of the teacher is crucial in what and how technology is used with students.

Characteristics of effective youth programs

There is agreement between the literature, the survey data and participants at 'youth' conferences about what makes for effective youth programs. Collaborative partnerships between youth organisations and the community are important; as are appropriate program content, a 'youth friendly' environment and the right staffing.

Partnerships at local level are considered critical, that is partnerships and coordination between the school, TAFE, the community college, health workers, youth workers and Centrelink. This was reiterated by participants at youth conferences and in the literature. Cooperation between support agencies needs to be strengthened so that basic needs such as food, shelter, clothing, financial support, counselling, health care and legal needs are taken care of. A model that seems to be working well in Canberra is one where youth workers are based in schools, and teachers operate out of youth centres (Long 2000:2).

In terms of program content, it is best to adopt a holistic approach that caters for the social, personal and academic needs of young people. Literacy and numeracy need to

be contextualised within practical and relevant real life activities. Programs need to be flexible, respond to individual needs and focus on increasing self esteem and confidence. Young people are to be encouraged to participate actively in the program design so as to develop a sense of ownership (Wiencke 1998).

Such programs need to operate in a 'youth friendly' environment which can be characterised by an informal atmosphere where young people are respected and valued. Many programs provide breakfast or lunch, with flexible timetabling and regular breaks.

In order to achieve such an environment, the right mix of staff is essential: staff who are empathetic to young people. It also works better to have two people 'on duty' at the same time, for example, the coordinator who is responsible for the personal well-being of the young people and the subject expert or teacher who is responsible for the content of the program.

The program observed at OASIS exemplified the above list of success factors. One of the participants all too compellingly reinforced the importance of one-to-one tuition, by telling his teacher after she had explained a maths process to him:

> *the reason I'm picking this up so quickly now is cos I've got a teacher who sits down and explains it, not like at school where I sat down the back and just looked dumb.*
>
> (Observation at OASIS 24.8.00)

Conclusion

Information about effective youth programs comes from a number of sources and is remarkably similar. The following list is a summary of what factors are considered to be important:

- early intervention
- collaborative partnerships
- coordination between services and agencies
- individual and long term case management, including counselling and support services
- small teacher/student ratios, one-to-one in some instances
- empathetic staff, including those on the front desk of institutions

- a broader, more practical and flexible curriculum
- positive, 'youth friendly' or adult learning environments
- placing youth workers in schools and teachers in youth centres
- adequate food, shelter and clothing
- removing artificial or legislative barriers that impede appropriate service delivery
- a central agency to provide information and support for youth and families
- funding systems that respond to local needs as part of a holistic approach
- a national commitment to youth.

Nothing on this list is new or radical or surprising. What is surprising is that despite the numerous projects and reports that have been done and written over the past decades, the situation does not seem to have improved. As one conference participant said of her current research:

> *the same stuff is coming out as thirty years ago when I worked with the Schools Commission.* (Centre for Popular Education Conference December 2000)

One is left wondering why? Ignorance about what to do, and fears about the cost of doing it, are unsustainable arguments. We know what works, why haven't we done it, or why aren't we doing it? We cannot use cost as an excuse either, as millions of dollars are currently being spent on 'fix up' programs that come too late. Spending money earlier on smaller class sizes and support services throughout primary and secondary school is surely more effective, so why not do it? Perhaps our society is comfortable with the continuance of the 'other', a group of young people destined to remain outside the mainstream and labelled 'at risk'.

Technology certainly has a role to play in engaging youth in learning, and providing them with opportunities to participate in global communities, however it is a tool only, not a solution in itself. It needs to be used as one aspect of effective programs based on the list of factors mentioned previously. The current hyperbole about the possibilities of technology sit uncomfortably with youth 'at risk', many of whom appear light years away from benefiting from an online world.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

Observation at Oasis

10.00 - 12.00 Thursday 24 August 2000

[The observation lasted two and a half hours and included a short taped interview with the teacher and one of the students.]

Oasis

[info. about Oasis from the brochure]

Background to the 'school'

Half way through 1999, J. approached OTEN about using their materials with her group of 'at risk' youth. OTEN was keen to work in partnership, particularly as they had been experiencing poor success with similar 'at risk' groups. The 'school' began with one set of CGE materials (Maths, English, Science, Computers, Business, Geography - the core subjects) which J. photocopied as required.

This year, ongoing enrolments were negotiated with OTEN which was a big breakthrough as it is not always possible to get enough students ready to start at the same time, particularly this group of students. It is now possible for 'at risk' students throughout NSW to enrol throughout the year with OTEN.

Students had to complete a pre-course test and this was done at Oasis with teacher support.

The school is open each day from 10.00 to 3.00 and students drop in when they want to. Being enrolled in accredited courses has given each student an end goal, which helps to motivate them. They are enrolled full time, up to 4 years.

One of the problems associated with studying by distance from OTEN is transport, as it is assumed that students will be studying from home and are therefore not eligible for a transport concession card. This disadvantages the students who travel to Oasis and is currently being reviewed by Centrelink.

Other barriers are accommodation - the refuge system and whether they have a place to stay that night or not. As well there is the general well-being of the student (sometimes drug-related) or related to general street life.

Teacher

The teacher (J.) is the Education Officer for Oasis. She has developed trust and rapport with the students and they refer to her constantly. She encourages positive self talk and works hard at convincing the students how 'bright' and 'clever' they are, even if they don't realise it themselves at first. She has 'rules' about four-letter words not being spoken in the classroom and insists on it. The students accept this.

A Science teacher from OTEN attends Tuesday and Thursday mornings from 10.00 to 12.00 to help with the Science modules. The regular OTEN (female) teacher was absent for this observation, and was replaced by a male Physics teacher (M.).

Course

Students are enrolled in the Certificate in General Education (Year 10), Year 11 or Year 12 at OTEN. The subjects include: Introductory Arithmetic Processes 4930E; Science Everywhere 4900CB; Language and Research Skills: Using Language for Living 4918AC; Standard English (Preliminary Course 4141EN); Design and Technology; Information Technology.

Students

There are a total of 21 students enrolled. Some are half-way through; some are just starting. One is in gaol and is continuing his studies there under the guidance of the chaplain; another is in de-tox. for 6 months and also continues to study. One student will not finish because he has taken up a traineeship in IT. Four students completed a week long 'Youth at Risk' program run from Melbourne which was very successful in terms of increased confidence and resulted in jobs for each of them.

4 students attended Thursday morning, the 24th August — T., N., H. and G.

T. hasn't been to 'school' for about a month because of accommodation problems and personal problems. She is enrolled in the Certificate in General Education (CGE) - English, Maths, Science and Hospitality. She attended special school and now comes to the Oasis school 3 days a week and works 2 days a week with people with disabilities at a neighbourhood centre.

G. travels from western Sydney is enrolled in CGE [more details about G.?]
N. is enrolled in Year 11 and is interested in Information Technology.[more info?]
H. is enrolled in Year 12 [more info?]

Materials

Materials are largely print-based from OTEN. Students have their individual subjects organised in folders which are stored on a shelf in the classroom. An interesting point to note is that when J. is working with a student she uses her own folder of work which she places alongside the student's so that she doesn't have to reach across them and thus invade their personal space. This is important because many of them have histories of physical abuse.

Casio calculators are used. What is noteworthy about these calculators is that they display the algorithm on the top line which allows students to see what they have entered, as well as the answer.

Resources

Most of the resources in the room are donated . For example, 4 fairly new Daewoo computers from Zonta (with hand-written stickers saying *DON'T DOWNLOAD ANYTHING*); drawers from the Government Printer; folders from BOAC; chairs from AAP and books (paperback novels) from various sources.

Observation: The morning unfolds

[The times are approximate only; provided to give an impression of the way the morning went.]

10.15 J. in kitchen making a cup of tea; T. wandering in and out trying to organise an appointment with the Youth Worker, J. and the Department of Housing for sometime that day.

N. leafing through the IT folder.

M. sitting by himself, marking other work, waiting for someone to ask for help. The radio is on fairly loudly (ie not background music) - tuned to Triple M. The phone rings frequently.
It's a noisy, 'messy', comfortable environment.

10.30 H. wanders in and has a conversation with N. about swapping mobile phone covers because she doesn't like the colour of hers. N. agrees to swap.

H. busies herself tidying up; putting paper in the printers; looking after plants in the terrarium. She is obviously proud of the plants that she has looked after and shows their progress to J. and myself. She is in the process of moving so is in 'packing' mood, not in the mood for work.

10.45 G. enters and goes out again soon after to buy cigarettes. Comes back shortly without success. H. offers to buy some for him and does so. G. has been paid so has money to spend.

N. and G. negotiate a cigarette break with J.

11.00 M. works with T. on her Maths (at J's suggestion). She experiences some difficulty with M.'s explanations and calls on J. frequently for clarification of what M. is trying to explain. J. is direct in her suggestions to M. about explaining things simply and clearly.

N. moves to a computer and works on Excel for a few minutes. Has discovered that he needs a text book to do the IT course so can't proceed at the moment.

G. works on Maths with J.

11.15 T. becomes frustrated and leaves the room for a short time (J. follows her and checks that she's okay.) T. is experiencing 'personal' problems today regarding accommodation.

J. attempts to get H. to complete an English task on poetry and persuades her to show me the poem and get my opinion of it. However, H. is not in the mood for this sort of work but reveals a sophisticated awareness of the poem and how to answer the questions.

N. is working on re-designing a business card and letterhead for a Design and Technology assignment. He spends some time searching through the supplies cupboard for where J. has 'hidden' the colour cartridge. Eventually he finds it after lots of banter back and forth about J. 'hiding' things and not being able to find them again. The colours of his original design don't come out when printed so he patiently changes the colour of the design, using Adobe Photoshop.

11.30 G. is working on his Maths with J. who moves back and forth between G. and T. G. corrects what he's been working on and adds up how many he gets right. He appears concerned with getting the right answers and J. tries to convince him of the importance of understanding the process.

J. alerts me to a comment that G. makes that the reason I'm picking this up so quickly now is cos I've got a teacher who sits down and explains it, not like at school where I sat down the back and just looked dumb.

H. continues to tidy up; waters her plants; gives one more soil; leaves instructions with J. and T. about not over-watering them. She appears to relate well to the other students who value her positive, cheerful interactions.

11.30 N. is still working patiently changing the colours of his design.

G. continues with Maths.

11.45 H. leaves.

A young man appears at the door and quietly arranges with J. to come back later in the day to work privately so that he doesn't 'lose face' with his peers.

12.00 M. leaves.

T. does speed copying, part of the Language and Research Skills module.

G. finishes his Maths (has done 2 questions, each with a number of sub-questions. He is pleased with his success and appears to have understood what he was doing.)

N. goes on to a chat line - 96.1.

12.15 G. goes on the chat line.

J. takes T. to her appointment with the Dept. of Housing.

End of morning session.

Technology

Computers are used as resources for writing up assignments; as part of the requirements of some subjects like Design and Technology or Information Technology. They are also used as rewards. Students write their name on a blackboard to book half an hour on the computer to chat (after they have finished their work). They are not allowed to use four letter words. Both N. and G. used the chat line at 12.00 and obviously enjoy doing so. T. also uses the chat line.

J. claims that students learn keyboard skills (if they don't work quickly they lose the contact), spelling and from the people they chat to. They are learning how to communicate and what works and what doesn't. She maintains that they also learn social skills because if they don't talk about something that people are interested in, they won't get responses.

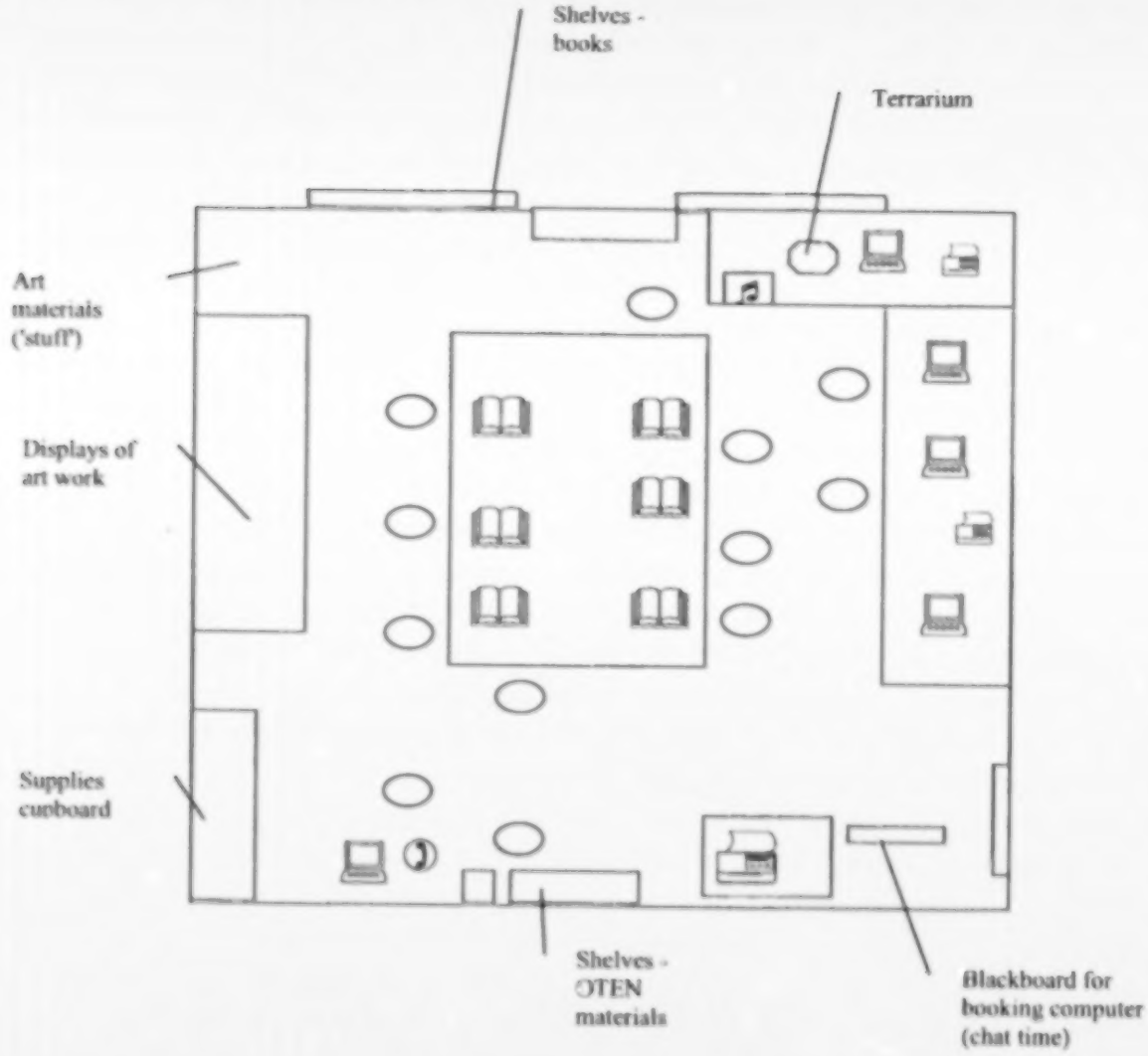
In terms of the more negative aspects of the Internet (ie pornography) students self monitor. It doesn't take long for someone to let J. know that someone is at the 'wrong' site. She could think of only three instances where someone had 'strayed' to the wrong site.

Outcomes

The most significant outcome is increased confidence. Students now feel confident to do the work and are self motivated. Whether they finish the course is not as important

as the fact that they have enrolled, have clear goals and develop confidence and belief in themselves.

Figure 1: Diagram of the Education Room (not to scale)



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APPENDIX 2

Survey Questionnaire

Computers and 'Youth at risk'

NSW ALNARC (Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium) is investigating if, and how, computers are being used in 'youth at risk' (ie early school leavers, unemployed, engaged in some form of post-school education or training) programs.

There is a lot of talk about the attraction of computers for youth; the government is pouring resources into making sure that schools have computers; the world is becoming ever more reliant on technological literacy. Where does that leave 'youth at risk"? Are the programs they're accessing equipping them for a technological world? Are computers the 'way in' to further education/training or employment for these groups? Are computers increasing their access to, and participation in, a global, information-rich community? Or …?

There are two stages in the research. The first is this survey; the second is more detailed case studies at selected sites. There is a small amount of funding available to practitioner researchers for the second stage.

Please take a few minutes to fill in the following survey about your program, either as a Word attachment or by hand. If you have a number of groups, please copy this survey and answer for each group. If you need to add more information, please attach another page.

If you'd like to talk to us in more detail about your experiences or to participate in the second stage of the research, please contact Jenny McGuirk on 02 9560 3147 or mmcguirk@ozemail.com.au

THANK YOU! ☺

1. Your name:_____ (optional)
2. Your position:_____
3. Contact details: Ph:_____ Fax:_____

   Email: _____

   Post: _____

   _____

   _____
4. Name of your program/course: _____
5. Description of your program (eg literacy/numeracy only; literacy/numeracy plus vocational; vocational, general education …) _____

   _____

NSW Office: University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), PO Box 123, Broadway NSW 2007

Directors:	Betty Johnston:	Ph: (02) 9514 3913	Fax: (02) 9514 3939	Email: betty.johnston@uts.edu.au
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Co-ordinator:	Jenny McGuirk:	Ph: (02) 9560 3147	Fax: (02) 9560 3147	Email: mmcguirk@ozemail.com.au

6. Description of the student group (eg age, year of schooling completed, barriers to learning or participation ...) _____

_____

_____

7. How long does the program run? _____ (no. of weeks)

8. How many hours a week in the program? _____ (no. of hours per week)

9. Do the students use computers in your program? ✔ ✖ If not, why not?

_____

_____

10. How many hours a week do you use computers? _____

11. How many students are using computers in this program/course? _____

12. Does each student have his/her own computer? ✔ ✖ or do they have to share? (1 computer between how many students?) _____

13. Are the computers located in a general purpose room ✔ or a designated computer room ✔ or somewhere else _____?

14. What are the computers used for?

				Please specify:
Teaching an accredited computer subject or module				
A resource/tool in other activities (eg word processing ...)				
Skills development (eg spelling, maths)				
Entertainment				
Rewards				
Other				

15. What software do you use?

				Please specify:
Word processing				
Database				
Spreadsheets				
Skills development (eg *Practise your spelling, Maths Blaster…*)				
Games				
CD Roms				
Other				

16. Do your students have access to the Internet? ✔ ✖ On-line all the time? ✔ ✖
Or timed log on and off? ✔ ✖ In your program, do students:

				Please give details about purpose and activities:
Use Email				
Participate in Web-based discussion groups				
Search or surf the Net				
Use on-line learning programs				
Other				

17. Do you find computers a useful tool for teaching this group of learners? In what ways? What activities or software have you found the most useful? What do your students respond to best?

18. What behaviours or outcomes have you observed in the interaction of students with each other and with computers?

19. Please add any other information that you think may be relevant to our study:

Thank you for your time. We appreciate the information you have supplied.

Please return your questionnaire in the stamped, addressed envelope to: Jenny McGuirk, NSW ALNARC, University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), PO Box 123, Broadway NSW 2007 OR email to: mmcguirk@ozemail.com.au

APPENDIX 3

Survey results

The project began with the survey (see Appendix 3) which was sent to 'youth at risk' programs in TAFE (Adult Basic Education and Outreach sections), and the Adult and Community sector (ACE), many of whom received Helping Early Leavers Program (HELP) funding, a state government initiative. Approximately 214 surveys were sent out with a response rate of 18%. The 38 respondents comprised 16 ABE teachers, 5 Outreach teachers, and 17 HELP teachers.

The data from the survey has been analysed according to these categories, and though some differences showed up, generally the responses were similar across the groups. This appendix contains summaries in table or text form of the responses to the most significant questions in the survey.

Background

Question 6 Description of the student group

ABE and Outreach groups

The groups all included young people between 15 and 24 (with the occasional 14 year old) but sometimes also included older people (up to 60 or 70). There had been a significant increase in the number of young people no year 10 qualification and multiple barriers to learning and employment. They were sometimes juvenile justice clients, with social problems relating to drugs or violence, sometimes homeless or with disruptive home life, many with diagnosed behavioural or learning problems, usually unemployed and often anxious about or resistant to learning. They included single teenage parents, aboriginal students, and students from both NESB and ESB backgrounds at all levels of literacy and numeracy learning. An increasing number had had previous experience with computers, which depending on their success, worked either as an advantage or a disadvantage to further learning.

HELP groups

The profile of these groups was similar to that of the ABE groups, though they had more often finished at least Year 10. The HELP program groups did include however some groups of students between years 9 and 12 who were still at school.

One teacher commented:

"These students are at risk of nearly everything simultaneously."

Tables of quantitative data: Question 8 – Question 16

Question 8 Average hours a week in the program ... (in hours)

Hours	ABE	Outreach	HELP	TOTAL
1-5	1	1	4	6
6-10	3	3	2	8
11-15	3		5	8
16-20	6		3	9
21-25			1	1
26-30	1			1
Total	14	4	15	33

Question 10 How many hours a week on average do you use computers in this program?

Hours	ABE	Outreach	HELP	TOTAL
1-2	4		6	10
3-4	5	2	2	9
5-6	5	1	2	8
7-8			2	2
9-10				
10+	1		1	2
Total	15	3	13	31

Question 12 Number of classes where students have access a computer on their own (ie do not have to share) ...

	ABE	Outreach	HELP	TOTAL
Own access	11	2	4	17

Question 13 Where are the computers located ... (number of classes)?

	ABE	Outreach	HELP	TOTAL
General purpose room	12	3	9	24
Designated computer room	11		5	16
Other (include.: laptops)	1	1	3	5

Question 14 What are the computers used for ... (number of classes)?

	ABE	Outreach	HELP	TOTAL
Teaching an accredited computer subject or module	11	3	3	17
A resource/tool in other activities	15	2	14	31
Skills development (eg spelling, maths)	14	2	7	23
Entertainment	11	3	10	24
Rewards	9	2	7	18

Other (include.:internet web design, research)	5	3	6	14

Question 15 What software do you use ... (number of classes)?

(for a list of specific software, see next section, qualitative data)

	ABE	Outreach	HELP	TOTAL
Wordprocessing	13	4	14	30
Database	8	2	2	12
Spreadsheets	10	2	5	17
Skills development	12	2	5	19
Games	8	1	7	16
CD Roms	7	3	5	15
Other	6	2	5	13

Question 16 Do your students have access to the internet ... (number of classes)?

	ABE	Outreach	HELP	TOTAL
On-lin all the time	6	1	9	16
Timed log on and off	3	3	8	14
Use email	6	1	9	16
Participate in Web-based discussion groups	7		3	10
Search or surf the Net	11	3	11	25
Use on-line learning programs	1		2	3
Other (include.: writing/ designing web pages	2	1		3

Qualitative data: Questions 15 – 19

Question 15 What software do you use?

	ABE	Outreach	HELP
Wordprocessing/ Databases/ Spreadsheets	Publisher Word Works Windows Office 97 MS Office Access Excel	Word *Word MS Office* Publisher Word 97 or 2000 Works Excel	MS 2000 Word Claris works Excel
skills	Maths blaster High school maths; essential maths essential spelling Edu Maths future school maths maths in practice maths detective maths in society Higher Score Maths	RTA practice test Textplay	Maths bank Phonics Alive Measuring UP Issues in English Maths Circus Interactive Picture Dictionary The Alphabet Maths Blaster Apple software on the Macs

	Typequick RTA practice test Roadlaw for Road Rules Issues in English English Master (Smart Works)		
games	Casino games carmen san diego ms golf sherlock holmes Solitaire etc (for use of mouse) solitile games on standard programs Graphics	*Quake (an interactive game on the net)*	Solitaire Sim City Carmen Sandiego
CD-ROMS	Encyclodpedia Dangerous creatures; encyclopedia of australia frogs; birds; great barrier reef … history of australia mammals national parks of australia . CGEA Measuring Up; Issues in English; Encarta Grolier World Book Encyclopedia; Issues in English;	*-in library to investigate course & career options* *-mixed image files* *-some Ss listen to Cdroms as they worked (with headphones on!)*	A large selection in each site which we un-install off one computer and rotate or lend
Other…	Earlier basic maths Expert typing tutor; first aid, interactive picture dictionary; Issues in English; Macquarie australian atlas; Roadlaw ; Graphics eg Harvard graphics; Internet; DTP/Internet - writing web pages; Netscape ; powerpoint; publisher; paint; scanner	*Publisher 98;* *various image enhancing programs;* *powerpoint;* *paint;* *Drawing*	Internet; powerpoint; ms publisher; photography ; L's Roadtester (outdated) and RTA Demo, about to get Roadlaw …Old stuff on old Macs but can still be useful even if graphics not as whizz bang.

Question 17 Are computers useful?

	Yes, absolutely	**Yes, but…**	**no**

ABE	12	2	
Outreach	4		
HELP	11	4	

In what ways are computers a useful tool for teaching this group of learners?

The uses of computers with this group of students can be divided into three main categories: as a motivational tool, as a resource for learning a wide range of skills, and as a resource for learning literacy and numeracy skills in particular.

Teachers find that computers are on the whole engaging and highly **motivational** for their students. Their use encourages students to share skills and time, and allows them to work at their own pace. Teachers can construct individualised tasks or programs. Access to computers can also act as a positive selling point to get the students to join the course in the first place -if they like computers and it must be remembered that not all do.

The **general skills** that a computer can usefully foster include: word processing, exploring and surfing the Net, skimming and scanning, researching, emailing, desk top publishing, illustration, listening (necessary to understand how to use programs etc). Students benefit from the practice that is easily available, they can get print outs or evidence of their progress. They are keen to become familiar with technological tools, and computer courses introduce them to the importance of using computers in their study and later at work.

As well as programs with a **specific literacy and numeracy** content, literacy and numeracy skills are increased because of the non-threatening nature of computers, which allow you to 'have a go', and give you easy means (eg Spellcheck) of correcting your work.

Two provisos were mentioned here: first, it is important that the use of the computer supports the content of the course, and second – the funding issue – computer use can be frustrating when there are not enough computers to support good learning.

What activities or software have you found the most useful (ie teacher perspective)?

Some teachers used the computer as a reward for work well done. One prepared short modules involving a range of skills, and focussing on eg computer knowledge or pop culture, another compiled personal CDs of shareware games with literacy-numeracy-computer skills base. A broad range of software can be appropriate, depending on

skills level – from initial literacy and numeracy programs to word processing, typing and spreadsheets.

Word processing, surfing the internet, logging video footage and web page design were all seen as useful activities - Microsoft Office and MS-Word or Word 7 being popular software. Material from Protea was thought to be colourful and interesting. Games allowed time for practice of particular skills, as for example the material for practising the test for L-plates. Editing their own work allowed students to publish material. The internet was seen to be enjoyable and interesting, encouraging students to do research and develop skills in gathering and evaluating information. Web searches and editing were also useful for resume writing and job searches.

What do your students respond to best (ie learner perspective)?

Teachers seem fairly widely agreed that the vast majority of students found using computers enjoyable and motivating. The activities to which students' responded well could be categorised into four groups: skills, information, communication and further education and employment.

The skills included producing well-formatted documents which allowed many for first time many to see themselves as successful writers, or designers. Word processing, layout and design, games, test practice, all come in this category. Powerpoint, Publisher and graphic programs like Image Composer were favourites, as was Wizard which allowed the design of a home page, as well as business cards, flyers etc. Job resumes were a particular focus of interest.

Information was available from CDs as well as the internet, though there was a perceived need for educational and informative CD's with a more adult based approach. The internet allowed students to follow up and develop their own interests eg NRL, music and car restoration even if their basic literacy skills were poor.

The **communication** and interactive possibilities of the internet were a strong attraction. One respondent saw computers as offering her students a valuable 'escape from their real life' through email and chat rooms, a place where they had some control over their own learning, and a strong incentive to write.

Quite a number of teachers emphasised the attraction and importance of the computer in relation to jobs: for resume writing, for job searching, for further education, and as skills that would improve students' life options.

Question 18

What behaviours or outcomes have you observed in the interaction of students with each other?

The most commonly expressed **benefit** in relation to student interaction was the increased sharing of skills and knowledge. Peer teaching, and teamwork were common and enjoyed, and led in many cases to enhanced communication skills. For those who did not want to work with others, computers allowed the choice of working alone, and teachers found that students could work on computers and not be embarrassed by their lack of literacy skills

There were few **problems** in this area. A few students did not experience the 'buzz' that many of the others did, and withdrew from the course in question. Group interaction in some cases decreased, and some students, intentionally or not, caused problems in the way they used the computers. Even this, however, could be seen as part of the learning.

The was a particular **need** to ensure flexibility in courses, tasks and participation to match varying skills.

What behaviours or outcomes have you observed in the interaction of students with the computers?

The **benefits**, or positive outcomes and behaviours, were many. Above all the experience for most students seemed to be enjoyable, improving self esteem and confidence with the increased access and the realisation that learning to use computers was not difficult.

They were impressed by the unexpected standard of their own work, and teachers found that the quality of work improved 'immeasurably'. Skills widened, the more timid students found it easier to seek help, and the motivating, focussed work promoted more independent learning. They liked using email and the internet, and were respectful of the equipment, slowly gaining an improved level of tolerance of 'glitches'. Computers allowed other interests of students to emerge (eg through surfing the net) and be developed. A number wanted to continue to use computers in other courses and perhaps in later employment.

The **problems** were twofold. The first related to those caused by old computers with slow responses and no access to the internet. The other related to how the students used the computers, there being the odd discovery of what teachers thought might be better undiscovered (eg pornography sites), student frustration with not being able to remember appropriate procedures, and even for some the difficulty for some of sitting still and concentrating.

In this area, there is a **need** to be aware that computer use is a big step for many of the students who have had little or no previous access to computers, and that in this as in any area there will be a multiplicity of attitudes – keenness, frustration, boredom, fear - which need to catered for through a variety of responses.

Question 19

Any further information that you think may be relevant to the study...

The benefits of using computers with groups of youth 'at risk' were many. They were motivating for almost all students, they were instrumental in improving literacy and numeracy skills in a non-threatening way, and were seen to have spin-offs for future employment opportunities. Computer courses as electives were a definite drawcard, and allowed the many students in these groups who had disrupted school careers, and/or no other access to computers, to catch up with their contemporaries.

There were also problems. Young people with negative educational experiences did not necessarily become magically attracted to using computers, but could be quite negative here as well. The enormous range in skill levels in most classes posed a challenge to teachers in negotiating appropriate learning experiences. By far the most serious problem, as might have been predicted, was the funding and resourcing of appropriate programs. This group of students was seen to be at the bottom of the line for funding, and many teachers spoke of lack of funding, lack of adequate access to reasonable computers, lack of scheduled time in the HELP program, and computer glitches that caused frustration resulting in some students dropping out.

Teachers saw important needs to be fulfilled. Apart from the overriding funding issue – for more, good computers, better software, with some on-line access, better programs and small group teaching – they pointed to the need for age appropriate, negotiated relevant programs and 'gentle' introductions for some reluctant adults. Professional development for teachers was also seen to be an issue.

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